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A MYSTIC SINGER OF JEANNE D'ARC

The greatest loss to French letters in the battle of the Marne—possibly in the World War—was Charles Péguy. For ten years he had attracted nation-wide attention as writer and as patriot, and his fame was beginning to compel admiration abroad. Spectacular as had been his militant rôle in the internal dissensions of France during the stormy days of the Dreyfus Affair, he did not hesitate, upon awakening to his country's peril, to denounce his former pacifist and socialist colleagues. His talent for creating symbols, his genius as a seer of visions, his virile originality in style, contributed to make him the founder of a school. So he acquired ascendancy over a circle of the élite, who came to consider him their moral and spiritual guide. Thus, Ernest Psichari, the grandson of Renan, in dedicating his *Appel des Armes*, addressed it "To the great and lonely figure, guardian to-day of the soul of France, whose work has aroused the love of all our youth, to our master, Charles Péguy." A guide to conscience, an innovator, a disseminator of ideas, Péguy gave new expression to ideas thronging his mind. Distinctive is the mystic note in the works he composed after 1908, the date of his return to the faith of his fathers. Few literary productions of modern times can equal in spiritual fervor and sonority *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, his most cherished creation.

Péguy's adoration of the saintly shepherdess was due no doubt to childhood associations. Born at Orleans in 1873, the son of a cabinet-maker who soon died, Charles grew up in the care of his mother and grandmother, pious toilers. The former, an upholsterer by trade, still lives in Orleans, where now a street has been named after her son, and where in 1915 a joint military and civil commission affixed to her house, on the first anniversary of Charles's death, a marble tablet commemorating his career. Of his debt to his grandmother, an illiterate cowherd, Charles always spoke with devotion. Her industry and that of his mother enabled him to enjoy the advantages of the city schools, including the *lycée*, in going to which he passed daily through the Rue Jeanne d'Arc. According to his teacher,

Gustave Fautras, he was a precocious lad of exceptional intelligence. Keenly interested in his studies, especially the "humanities," he was wont to attain highest honors in each class.

Encouraged by his academic success, Péguy decided to become a teacher, and to this end attended two Parisian institutions, the Lycée Lakanal and the Collège Sainte-Barbe. Then he chose to perform his military service, and while in the army came under the spell of socialist propaganda. Having entered the Higher Normal School, he left it before finishing his course to engage in journalism, and for the moment he came to admire Zola and Jaurès almost as much as Jeanne d'Arc. But eventually the subversive doctrine furnished its own cure. The socialists, busy in devising means for the destruction of the army, the navy, and the Church, lost sight of issues that were essentially national and international, and were taken wholly by surprise by the German Emperor's spectacular visit to Morocco in 1905.

At that time Péguy, already awakened to his folly, published, in his *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, a fortnightly review, *Notre Patrie*, a sarcastic analysis of French socialist government during the preceding four years. In his unique style, admitting at one place eighteen pages of diatribe without a period, he lays bare the hypocrisies, incompetence, and destructive policies of his former political partisans. By his innuendoes and clever comparisons, he brings against the socialist régime a powerful indictment. The Zolas, Jaurès, and Pelletans now appear as fallen idols. None merits quite so much contempt as Émile Combes, "le petit bonhomme populaire," whose sole ambition has been to persecute the religious orders and to humble the Church. The supporters of the army and the Church are shown to have been the victims of a detestable official espionage. In short, the author demonstrates that a political despotism, if exercised by the narrow-minded, may be far worse than the military despotism of the Empire. *Notre Patrie* made honorable amends for the errors of Péguy. Then, once more under the inspiration of his martyr heroine, though continuing to expose the chimeras of pacifism, he turned his attention to belles-lettres.

In 1912 appeared *The Mystery*, his trilogy composed in commemoration of the five hundredth anniversary of the Maid's birth.

Of this vast epic he says: "It has been given to me to endeavor to put all that a man can of himself in representing the fourteen or fifteen mysteries, and the unequalled mystery of the life and vocation and sanctity and martyrdom of the greatest saint, I believe, that has ever existed." To analyze in detail this imposing monument, which exhibits all the daring of genius, would require a volume. Péguy does not follow the facts of history, but, as the title indicates, emphasizes rather the mystic aspects of his subject. Accordingly, Joan appears neither before Charles VII at Chinon nor at the siege of Orleans, neither at the coronation in Rheims nor in her martyrdom at Rouen. Her visions, even, play no prominent part in the story. The epic, the scene of which opens in 1425 near Joan's native village, contains but three characters. Hauviette, a neighbor girl who serves as a contrast to Joan, appears only in Part I. The third character, Madame Gervaise, is a nun intended to personify the quiet conservatism and humility that would accept as inevitable the evil in the world. As for Joan, though tenacious of her political convictions, she is concerned chiefly with spiritual matters, asking herself repeatedly why God permits such misery in the realm of France. Human iniquity, she reasons, can doubtless be explained, an explanation that seems to her the more urgent since, in tolerating it, she virtually becomes its accomplice. How different is her friend Hauviette, the type of Christian who considers duty to consist in conforming to public custom. Far from her is the thought of moral responsibility for the acts of others! And so, unable to obtain satisfaction from Hauviette, Joan has recourse to Madame Gervaise.

In their interminable discussions, Madame Gervaise does most of the talking, but affords the impatient shepherdess little consolation and no satisfactory explanation of the existence of evil. After deploring the ravages of the Hundred Years' War, they come to the question of redemption, which involves a detailed narrative of the life of Christ and His Passion. Joan, whose heart is set upon ending the war and its attendant suffering, receives a rude shock when told that even Christ Himself cannot save the unwilling. Her despair is deepened by hearing of the cowardice and treachery of those who deserted Jesus in His

hour of need. True, Madame Gervaise constantly suggests extenuations for human frailties, but Joan's rigid moral code accepts excuses only reluctantly.

Part II opens with a poetic and philosophic comparison of Faith, Hope, and Charity. Hope for the dramatist is supreme, a virtue symbolized by the child, and displayed in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Especially beautiful here is the glorification of Night as the perpetuator of Hope, since it brings forgetfulness of woe. The Creator thus apostrophizes Night:—

“Nuit, tu es sainte, Nuit, tu es grande, Nuit tu es belle ;
 Nuit au grand manteau,
 Nuit, je t'aime et je te salue et je te glorifie, et tu es ma
 grande fille et ma créature.
 O belle Nuit, Nuit au grand manteau, ma fille au manteau
 étoilé,
 Tu me rappelles ce grand silence qu'il y avait
 Avant que j'eusse ouvert les écluses d'ingratitude. . . .”

Part III of Péguy's mystic trilogy is consecrated to the Saints Innocent in eulogy of the symbol of Hope. These little victims of Herod, the poet avers, are of all martyrs the only immaculate saints. What incomparably enhances their glory is their having been of the same age as Jesus and having lived at the same time. “Rien n'est beau comme un enfant qui s'endort en faisant sa prière,” affirms the Creator. Saint Louis and the French of the Crusades are not forgotten, however,—“peuple intelligent, peuple laborieux, peuple militaire.” Indeed, God Himself is amazed at the saintliness of Louis IX, who preferred leprosy to sin: “I remain trembling,” says God, “I remain confounded by that proof of love.”

Though *The Mystery*, by concluding without direct allusion to the martyr heroine, disconcerts the reader, yet it is an imaginative epic of rich and varied style. It must be enjoyed, however, as a “spectacle dans un fauteuil.” Nobody would think of attempting it on the stage in its present form, since the part of Madame Gervaise would run for hours without interruption. Péguy paints daringly yet reverently, thrilling us as he reveals the springlike purity and beauty of the soul of little Joan. Like a devout paladin of old, he kneels before his subject, predestined

for it by temperament. "Faith," he exclaims, "is a church, a cathedral, rooted in the very soil of France!"

Resembling in mystic content this epic on Jeanne d'Arc is Péguy's *Ève* (1913), a poem of 5600 lines dealing with the Resurrection. Composed in quatrains, it excels *The Mystery* in artistic finish, and, like it, is characterized by plenitude of matter. The poet, in considering the vices and weaknesses of man, the perversions of modern society, the artificiality of our civilization, cannot help preferring the simplicity of primitive society. "Seule vous le savez," he declares to Eve,—

"Seule vous le savez, nos travaux d'aujourd'hui
Ne valent pas le quart de l'antique paresse.
Et les brutalités de notre énorme ennui
Ne valent pas le quart de l'antique tendresse.

"Tout se voit et se vaut et se vend à la porte.
Tout s'étale et triomphe et se vend au marché.
Tout se montre et se dit et se place et rapporte:
Est-ce là le salut que nous avons cherché?"

Particularly vivid is the picture of the Resurrection, when the redeemed "will go in companies led by their priests . . ." and upon arriving in paradise will find among the most beloved saints Joan, who "left Lorraine as a humble girl equally devoted to God and to her country."

After Lamartine and Verlaine, Charles Péguy is the greatest religious poet of France. Although he cannot attain to their musical perfection, he surpasses them in creative impulse and depth of thought. He draws in broad strokes. His thought is charged with lofty aspirations and bold conceptions, rendered with a robust vigor and an impetuosity that compromises now and then the clearness and elegance of his expression. His poetry, owing to its primeval energy and power of concrete imagery, has been likened to that of Homer.

Péguy, however, was not only an author; he was also an editor and promoter of letters. In his famous *Cahiers* he published, besides Romain Rolland's *Beethoven* and *Jean-Christophe*, works by such promising writers as Émile Moselly, Gabriel Trarieux, and the brothers Tharaud. His ardent defence of humanist culture is well known. His philosophic work shows

him to have been an original thinker interested in a diversity of questions. That he was swept from his true path for a time by political currents was hardly strange. His return, disillusioned and repentant, made amends. At heart he was ever one of the faithful, a patriot stirred from childhood, as we have seen, by stories of Joan of Arc and of the "terrible year." Viewing with grief the national humiliation of 1870, he was obsessed by the thought that he came of a generation vanquished and deprived of the opportunity to wipe out its humiliation. His burning desire was to take part in the final settlement with Germany. When, on the fifth of September, 1914, the coveted moment arrived, Péguy rushed to the front, fighting as a lieutenant, and fell in one of the first charges of the momentous battle. His heroic blood added its color to the dawn of victory at the Marne. Said Maurice Barrès, "Ce Mort est un guide." Of such a death Péguy himself had written in his *Ève* :—

"Heureux ceux qui sont morts dans une juste guerre."

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